

## Preparing for an Assessment Centre

It is a real achievement to be invited to an Assessment Centre as this often means you have made it to the final stages of the recruitment process. This sheet will give you some ideas about the situations you are likely to face, how you can prepare for them and where you can find opportunities to practise.

The Assessment Centre, or Selection Centre, may be on the employer's premises or in a "neutral" venue, such as a hotel or conference centre.

**Purpose:** Assessment centres are used by employers to observe candidates' performance in a range of activities that are either related to work activities or demonstrate skills you would use in the workplace. This is seen as more reliable and fair than interview alone since it provides opportunities for candidates to show what they can actually do.

The most common **assessment methods** are:

1. Group discussions and activities
2. Written tests and exercises – including in-tray or e-tray exercises, case studies or appreciation exercises, personality or aptitude tests.
3. Presentations
4. Interviews
5. Social activities

### 1. Group discussions and activities

Assessors observe a small group of candidates and may "score" candidates against a list of skills or attributes which they are looking for.

**Group discussions** These may be on a topic relevant to the employer, or a general current affairs issue or recent news item. They could take the form of a case study (see below). Sometimes one of the group will be assigned as leader; more usually the group is leaderless.

**Group task** This could be a practical activity (indoors or outdoors) such as constructing a tower out of bricks. It could be a problem solving task, such as a job related scenario presented on briefing paper.

It could involve **role play** with individuals assigned specific roles to deal with a realistic situation. Other people in the role play may be actors or assessors or other candidates.

### Skills assessed by group exercise

- Team work
- Interaction with others
- Ability to understand and absorb information
- Ability to identify key points
- Clarity of thought
- Communication skills – express ideas clearly
- Persuasiveness
- Problem solving/lateral thinking
- Open-mindedness
- Originality of ideas
- Setting goals/priorities

### **Tips for approaching group exercises:**

- Work with the group, contribute without trying to dominate
- Listen to the ideas of others
- Keep the group focused
- Consider assigning roles
- Support other members of the group
- Clarify what the group has achieved so far
- Keep a note of the time

## **2. Written tests and exercises**

### **(i) In-tray or e-tray exercises**

These are designed to simulate the administrative aspects of the job. You are given a range of material which could include letters, emails, faxes, memos and phone messages. Your task is to decide on your priorities for responding to these and deal appropriately with each item. You may need to indicate your actual response to each item by drafting a reply. You will need to be able to justify your reasoning.

E-tray exercises are an electronic version of the above. You deal with an inbox containing a series of emails. Sometimes additional emails may arrive as you are working.

### **Skills assessed by in-tray exercises:**

- Prioritising
- Organisation
- Analysing
- Time management
- Working under pressure
- Written communication

### **Tips for approaching in-tray exercises:**

- Scan the material quickly to get an overview of the issues
- Don't expect to read everything thoroughly
- Decide quickly what is the most important
- Who is the message from? When it was sent
- What is the timescale?
- Do you need to consult?
- What style of language is appropriate for your responses – formal or informal?
- What are the implications for the company?
- Can anything be delegated or deferred?
- Be prepared to explain the rationale behind your approach

### **(ii) Case studies or appreciation exercises**

These involve the analysis of a hypothetical situation of which no previous knowledge is required. You are given a set of documents such as official reports, figures, letters, newspaper reports, memos etc. and a problem to solve. You will have to give a recommendation for action in the form of a written report and/or a presentation. Questions normally follow. There is unlikely to be one "correct" answer. Case studies can be given as a group activity or as an individual exercise.

### **Skills assessed by case studies:**

- analysing information quickly and accurately
- abstracting relevant information
- structuring a problem
- identifying key issues
- thinking logically and creatively.
- expressing ideas coherently either verbally or on paper
- making decisions and justifying them
- putting forward a persuasive case

### **Tips for approaching a case study:**

- Skim read/listen for an overall picture
- Select important information
- Break the problem down
- Focus by prioritising
- Make sure you understand the issues (ask for further clarification, if needed)
- Keep an eye on the time
- Present your findings/decisions clearly, showing that you understand the task, the process you went through and the issues you considered

### **(iii) Drafting exercises**

You are given some sensitive information and asked to draft a letter clearly and tactfully, responding to the situation. E.g. a customer is complaining that his previous enquiry has received no response. This tests a candidate's judgment, tact and powers of expression.

### **(iv) Personality tests**

The questions in these tests are used to identify your likely responses to situations where there are no right or wrong answers. They look at your personal characteristics, social skills, preferred style of working etc. The best advice is to be yourself, don't try to guess what type of personality the employer is looking for. Personality tests often have a built in question structure which may detect inconsistencies.

### **(v) Aptitude/psychometric tests**

These are often given to candidates to do as an online exercise before they are asked for an interview or to an assessment day. Some are still given at assessment centres, sometimes to check for consistency with the results that you obtained in the online test. They are designed to assess a wide spread of abilities particularly numerical, verbal or spatial reasoning. They are timed tests done under exam conditions. (See '**How to Practice Aptitude Tests**' information sheet) Tests may include Personality questionnaires.

## **3. Presentations**

You may be asked to prepare a short talk and present it in front of other applicants and/or the recruiters. You may be given a topic before the assessment day or you may be given it when you arrive. It may relate to the case study or other activity you have done. It may be a team activity. The length of the presentation required will vary. You may be able to use a variety of visual aids, but you need to confirm this with the recruiters. (See '**Presentation Skills**' information sheet)

### **Skills assessed**

- Time management
- Communication
- Ability to think and deliver under pressure
- Body language
- Ability to respond to questions which may follow

## **4. Interviews**

There may be several in-depth interviews with different interviewers on a one-to-one basis or there may be a panel interview where several interviewers will be present, each one asking questions in turn (see '**How to prepare for interviews**' information sheet).

## **5. Social activities**

Do remember that you may be assessed throughout the time you are with the employer – even at lunch or in the bar! It is also quite common for assessors to ask about candidates' attitude and behaviour towards staff who are not involved in the assessment centre, such as reception staff.

## **Resources**

### **Careers Service Events**

- The Careers Service runs a practical workshop on Assessment centres, which allows you to experience a range of selection exercises.
- Other useful courses and workshops include 'Interview Skills', 'Cracking the Case Study', 'Perfecting Presentations' and 'Preparing for the Workplace'. These are part of our free events programme, and places can be booked online through the Careers Service website.

**Careers Service online psychometric tests** (supplied by Profiling for Success)

[www.york.ac.uk/careers/info\\_future.cfm?page=70](http://www.york.ac.uk/careers/info_future.cfm?page=70)

### **Resources available in the Careers Service Information Room**

Use the DVDs, information file and the book "How to Succeed at Assessment Centres" for further help. We also have a selection of sample aptitude tests available to borrow or buy and a range of books with examples and guidance for completing aptitude tests.

### **Other related Careers Service Information Sheets (also downloadable from the Careers website)**

- How to Practise Aptitude Tests
- Presentation Skills
- How to Prepare for Interviews

DVDs include:

- 'Why Ask Me That' which shows a typical selection interview,
- 'The Assessment Centre' which follows candidates on a selection day and
- 'Making an Impact' which shows a selection of recent graduates being interviewed by 3 different companies, plus an example of a graduate telephone interview. Each gives feedback from the interviewers.

### **Useful web resources**

**General advice on Assessment Centres** can be found on:

<http://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres>

[www.prospects.ac.uk//assessment\\_centres.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk//assessment_centres.htm)

**Sample case study exercises** can be found on:

[www.kent.ac.uk/careers/interviews/marstairs.htm](http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/interviews/marstairs.htm)

From Bain and Company

[www.joinbain.com/apply-to-bain/interview-preparation/default.asp](http://www.joinbain.com/apply-to-bain/interview-preparation/default.asp)

From McKinsey&Company:

[www.mckinsey.com/careers](http://www.mckinsey.com/careers) (select 'how do I apply?')

From Marakon Associates (global strategy and management consultancy firm) interactive case study and tips for case study interviews

[www.marakon.com/car\\_app\\_grad\\_case.asp](http://www.marakon.com/car_app_grad_case.asp)

**Sample group exercise and in-tray material can be found at:-**

[www.swan.ac.uk/careers/Jobsearchskills/Assessmentcentres/](http://www.swan.ac.uk/careers/Jobsearchskills/Assessmentcentres/) practical examples

[www.faststream.gov.uk](http://www.faststream.gov.uk) (select 'How do I apply?' for an e-tray practice test).



Follow us on Facebook [www.facebook.com/yorkcareers](http://www.facebook.com/yorkcareers)